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# Tribal Society: Dispossession from Land and Crisis of Existence

**Dr. Naresh Kumar Gautam** [1], **Dr. Sunita Sonwani** [2]

[1] Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Shri Rawatpura Sarkar University, Raipur
Email: nareshgautam0071@gmail.com

[2] Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, Shri Rawatpura Sarkar University, Raipur
Email: sonwanidrsunita@gmail.com

***Abstract***

*This research paper attempts to understand the particular perspective that mainstream society has constructed about tribal communities and the politics related to their development, especially at a time when India is celebrating 78 years of independence. During these 78 years, the level of development expected for tribal communities is still not clearly visible.*

*While tribal societies have often been more liberal and progressive than mainstream society in their culture and ways of life — something that is still reflected in their dialects, languages, lifestyles, and social practices — a specific perception about them has nevertheless been created. According to this perception, tribal communities are often portrayed as naked, poor, helpless, and backward. Whenever their development is discussed, the primary emphasis tends to be on educating them. Instead of learning from them or understanding their ways, the focus remains on assimilating them into the mainstream.*

*This particular viewpoint has largely been shaped by television advertisements and sections of the intellectual class, reinforcing the belief that "we" are superior while others are inferior. To truly understand tribal communities, it is essential to examine their history and struggles, as they have endured significant displacement and suffering in the name of development, to the extent that many memories of their lived experiences have become fragmented.*

*If a community loses its memories and history, how can it genuinely develop? Or, in such a context, what does development actually mean for that society?*

***Keywords:*** *Tribal society, development, politics, identity, displacement*

## Introduction

We are talking about the development of those whom we have universally considered underdeveloped. Perhaps we are trying to guide them from the same upper rung of civilization. Here, I am presenting my paper on a global perspective on the theoretical framework of the development process.

In India, whether we talk about tribal development or simply development, there are different perspectives. One perspective considers material development as the development of society, which includes things like roads, transportation, electricity, and houses built with bricks.

The other perspective is based on social development, which includes knowledge, health, air, water, food, and employment. From this perspective of development, Roy and Robinson say that "development is a positive change in the physical, social, and political levels of the people of any country." Similarly, in the words of Clark J., "development is a process of change that enables people to become the masters of their own destiny and to realize all their inherent potential." (Murmu, 2016)

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Neither of these definitions is reflected in the development of tribal societies, but what has happened is that the government has strengthened roads and transportation networks. This facilitates the easy migration of people and the convenient exploitation of local forest and mineral resources.

Even 78 years after independence, in a country like India, which aspires to establish itself among the developed nations of the world, tribal communities still live in illiteracy, neglect, exploitation, and marginalization. It is tragic that while the constitution guarantees citizens' rights and numerous laws have been enacted for their welfare, these laws prove to be a mere deception when it comes to their application to tribal communities. The slogan of rights to water, forests, and land has turned out to be a betrayal for the tribals. The tribal population in India exceeds 104.5 million, and they belong to more than 700 different communities.

They constitute approximately 8.6 percent of the country's total population. Roughly 72 percent of the country's natural resources, 90 percent of its coal mines, and 80 percent of its mineral wealth are located in tribal areas, yet 85 percent of the tribal population is still forced to live below the poverty line. Furthermore, 83 percent of them are working as bonded laborers, and 71 percent are still illiterate. Due to government neglect, corporate entities are dispossessing them of their lands and mineral resources, while these corporations themselves live lives of luxury. Our society is largely unaware of the traditional occupations, culture, dialects, languages, scripts, religions, history, and contributions of the tribal people to India's independence and human development. In the modern world, this can be overlooked, but it cannot be erased from history. Today, history has taken a new turn. (Murmu, 2016)

The same ancient tribal society that was marginalized by modern society is now receiving recognition. Many non-tribal people today are largely unaware of tribal society and culture, leading to misconceptions and misinformation about them. Until now, people have considered tribal communities to be cruel and savage. In reality, those who consider themselves civilized, suffering from a narrow-minded perspective, have themselves propagated false notions about tribal people, demonstrating their own ignorance. Media advertisements have also played a significant role in this. Mainstream society, in the name of development, wants to displace tribal communities from their ancestral lands, separating them from their water, forests, and land. What I am trying to say is that the scope of nature that we perceive may be smaller than the scope of nature perceived by tribal societies, because nature has been an integral part of their lives. We can only understand this by examining their epistemology and tracing the cause-and-effect relationships within it. Undoubtedly, many things considered supernatural will transform into natural phenomena. This is why tribal communities do not want to be separated from their ancestral lands and are unable to participate in the new paradigms of development. However, this perspective is a source of discomfort for mainstream society. The process of upliftment and development of tribal communities began with the arrival of British rule and has gradually gained momentum. However, it has still not reached a conclusive stage. (Singh, 2014)

## Objectives

- To analyze the perspective developed by mainstream society toward tribal communities.
- To critically examine the politics surrounding the development of tribal communities.
- To highlight the cultural autonomy, progressive elements, and traditional knowledge systems of tribal communities.
- To reinterpret the concept of development in the context of displacement, erosion of historical memory, and identity crisis among tribal communities.

## Methodology

This paper attempts to understand the politics of development and the current development model of tribal society, and to explore the unanswered questions arising from the ongoing struggles of tribal communities.

The study is based on a thematic analysis of various studies, journal articles, reports, websites, and books related to tribal societies. This research paper is primarily based on secondary data sources.

**Discussion**

After independence, the country embarked on a rapid process of industrialization, and simultaneously, colonial-era treatment of tribal communities began. Despite the fact that in this initial phase, even after giving up their lands, the tribals were supportive of the country's development and national interest, this sentiment transformed into questioning after the Nehru era. Two things were happening concurrently: on one hand, the tribals' land was being seized, and on the other hand, external forces were forcibly intruding upon their social and cultural systems. At the local level, the tribals' own social and cultural systems were by no means undemocratic, but in the name of decentralization of democracy, these tribal institutions were dismantled. In this way, the system, despite the existence of tribal protection acts in tribal areas, rapidly facilitated the entry of non-tribals through legal means. This entry proved alarming because it pushed tribal society into a new phase of exploitation. What Verrier Elwin had repeatedly expressed concern about, and which Nehru had acknowledged in his Panchsheel principles, was being contradicted in practice. A comprehensive psychological study was not conducted while formulating plans for the development of tribals, leading to the invention of exploitative, mechanistic systems among the tribals in the name of national unity. The Forest Department proved to be the most detrimental in this regard. This administrative process created an atmosphere of alienation among the tribals.

On one hand, there was no concrete legal framework for rehabilitation in the face of displacement due to land acquisition, and on the other hand, the tribal economy, which was intertwined with agriculture and forest produce, collapsed. Not only was their land gone, but the forests and their products were also taken away from them. This directly impacted the tribals economically, and all the promises made to them regarding jobs and development during their displacement remained unfulfilled. In the areas from which the tribal people were displaced, numerous gleaming factories and large residential colonies were built. However, this not only pushed the tribal people to the margins but also led to their rapid transformation from farmers to laborers—unskilled and untrained laborers. There were no job opportunities for them in those areas. The people who lived in the newly developed colonies were not tribal, nor were they familiar with tribal culture. Consequently, the two populations remained strangers to each other. Ultimately, the inhabitants of the colonies established their dominance, and the tribal society, which had once taken pride in its culture, found itself looked down upon. The culture of the colonies was a non-tribal culture, which brought with it Brahmanical, feudal, and patriarchal values. (Lugun, 2018)

As a result, the tribal communities lost their identity, and the social structure that emerged in the slums and shantytowns was neither like their former society nor like the society of the colony. Such social structures present unique examples and have undergone a long process of formation. In later years, economic problems became the primary concern for the tribals. Moreover, when tribal laborers entered the market of the colony, they were unable to define their labor in a meaningful way because their previous social context was entirely different from the existing environment. The language, lifestyle, food habits, and customs of the colony were all alien to them. Their inability to adapt to this different environment led to feelings of alienation, creating a situation of conflict for them.

The threat of displacement is rampant due to the industries being established in tribal areas in the name of development. Cases of fraud regarding their water, forests, and land have increased under the guise of forest laws. Colonialism and capitalism have been at work there for the past one and a half centuries. Religions are being spread very rapidly in tribal areas, affecting their lives. However, it is also true that this is being strongly resisted. For the past several decades, the government has been unleashing its wrath on the people of tribal areas. Their strength—their unity, their land, their forests—is being systematically destroyed. People have been killed over land disputes. Women have been raped. And homes have been burned down in the name of

eliminating Naxalites. Millions of people are being displaced. Entire villages are becoming victims of migration, or, to put it more accurately, they are being forcibly displaced.

As is well known, after independence, India made concerted efforts to rapidly accelerate industrialization. These efforts were largely successful, and industries emerged as a new source of employment. The areas where industries were established underwent a transformation. People became economically stronger. Roads were built, connecting many remote areas to bustling cities. However, throughout this process, one thing was happening that both the government and society chose to ignore: the exploitation of tribal communities! A deliberate conspiracy to dispossess them of their land, which was given the name "development"!

The report, titled "Report of the High-Level Committee on the Socio-Economic, Health and Educational Status of Tribal Communities of India," states that approximately 25 percent of tribal people experience displacement at least once in their lives due to development projects. A government-appointed expert committee on the rehabilitation of tribal populations recently stated that tribal communities constitute 47 percent of the people displaced by development projects. (change, 2016) Based on the facts from the annual report (2007-08) of the Department of Land Resources, under the Ministry of Rural Development, the aforementioned report states that a total of 5.06 lakh cases related to land acquisition from tribal communities have been filed in courts. These cases involve 9.02 lakh hectares of land. Of the cases filed, 2.25 lakh cases were decided in favor of the tribal population, concerning 5 lakh acres of land. The court dismissed a total of 1.99 lakh cases on various grounds. These cases involved 4.11 lakh acres of land. The report states that the dismissal of such a large number of cases is worrying and is due to loopholes in the law or the negligent behavior or complicity of the state.

Maharashtra, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand hold 70 percent of the country's coal reserves. 80% of the country's iron ore, 60% of its bauxite, and almost 100% of its chromite are also located in these three states. According to a study by the Centre for Science and Environment, "Rich Lands, Poor People" (2008), 50 percent of the districts with the highest mineral production are predominantly tribal. These areas also have a forest cover of 28 percent, which is higher than the national average (20.9 percent). The major cause of displacement is estimated to be the construction of dams. The number of people displaced by dams ranges from 20 million to 50 million. However, there is a consensus among scholars that 40 percent of the displaced people belong to Scheduled Tribes, while the tribal community constitutes only 8.6 percent of the country's total population.

Of the people displaced by development projects, 40 percent are from tribal communities, 20 percent are from Scheduled Castes, and 20 percent are from other backward classes. Development projects have led to the loss of 25 million hectares of land, including 7 million hectares of forest land. Only 25% of the displaced people have been rehabilitated, while only 21.16% of the displaced tribal people have been rehabilitated. The remaining 79% are still struggling for rehabilitation. Development can be easily seen based on these figures.

If we look at newspaper reports every year, the highest number of killings of tribal’s has been over land. Calling it murder would be an understatement; it would be more accurate to call it a massacre, and that is precisely what has happened. Villages have been burned down simply because they refused to give their land to the government and corporations, or because they demanded compensation for their land. Recently, on July 17, 2019, eleven people were brutally shot and hacked to death in Uttar Pradesh. This was neither the first nor the last such incident; it is a daily occurrence across the country, sometimes in the name of Naxalism, and sometimes for raising voices against the government. These incidents are escalating year after year. Land acquisition, however, continues unabated, as can be easily seen in the graph below. The demand for the state of Jharkhand was made to ensure the better development of its tribal population. Development did occur, with numerous projects being implemented, but the tribals' lands were auctioned off for a pittance. Only a handful of local tribals received employment in exchange for displacement, while the rest were left to wander from place to place in search of a livelihood. Such processes of development are unlikely to change in the near future, and these questions will repeatedly confront us, whether it be the Uttar Pradesh movement of May

2011 or the Jaitapur land acquisition case in Maharashtra. Since the formation of the state of Jharkhand, the land acquisition figures are as follows:

**Land Acquired from Tribal Communities by the Jharkhand Government so far.**

| S. No. | Location | Acres/Area |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Jamtara | 482.55 |
| 2 | Saraikela | 37748.19 |
| 3 | Dhanbad | 1581.59 |
| 4 | Lohardaga | 282.36 |
| 5 | Hazaribagh | 47195.98 |
| 6 | Godda | 6840.032 |
| 7 | Latehar | 668.16 |
| 8 | Garhwa | 366.26 |
| 9 | Gumla | 501.72 |
| 10 | Simdega | 1768.65 |
| 11 | West Singhbhum | 329.68 |
| 12 | East Singhbhum | 847.97 |
| 13 | Bokaro | 30203.69 |
| 14 | Dumka | 4436.26 |
| 15 | Sahebganj | 482.55 |
| 16 | Godda | 2208.06 |
| 17 | Deoghar | 7270.33 |
| 18 | Giridih | 1095.71 |
| 19 | Chatra | 1876.03 |
| 20 | Palamu | 6394.66 |
| 21 | Khunti | 227.12 |
| 22 | Ranchi | 16548.99 |

**Acquisition of Land by the Government in the Name of Development Projects.**

| Serial No. | Location/District | Project | Land Acquisition (Acres) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Ranchi | NH 33 Hazaribagh Ranchi, Road Widening 4 Lane | 270.48 |
| 2 | Giridih | DFCCI | 26.32 |
| 3 | Bokaro | NH Project | 117.57 |
| 4 | Ramgarh | NH Project | 214.97 |
| 5 | Hazaribagh | NH Project | 413.52 |
| | | Koderma Ranchi Rail Line | 4.60 |
| | | DFCCI | 16.54 |
| 6 | Chatra | Tori Shivpur Rail Line | 18.52 |
| 7 | Dhanbad | NH Project | 334.36 |
| | | DFCCI | 147.76 |
| 8 | Koderma | DFCCI | 44.50 |
| | | Koderma Ranchi Railway Line | 12.49 |
| 9 | Deoghar | Deoghar Airport | 437.70 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Sahebganj | Ganga Bridge Construction Project | 92.83 |
| | | Inland Waterways Project | 182.27 |
| 10 | Latehar | Tori Shivpur Railway Line | 487.33 |
| 11 | East Singhbhum | NH Project | 268.09 |
| 12 | Saraikela Kharsawan | NH Project | 117.17 |
| | | Total | 3326.715 |

## Conclusion

Tribal communities have suffered so much displacement and hardship in the name of development that their life memories are now scattered. And if a society lacks its own life memories and history, how can you expect it to develop? We have completely assumed that tribal people cannot develop in accordance with their own talents because, supposedly, they have no talent at all. This perspective is, in fact, a viewpoint created by mainstream society, which has universally deemed them underdeveloped. Perhaps we are trying to guide them from the very top rung of the ladder of civilization. And this guidance is becoming a means of their exploitation. Tribal people have been granted constitutional rights, but in most cases, these rights have been used against them, as evidenced by numerous examples that frequently appear in newspaper headlines. The development of tribal society is like a tree that is uprooted and then replanted elsewhere; it will likely never be able to establish its roots as firmly as before. In the name of development, governments are launching large-scale projects that require land and cheap labor. In tribal-dominated areas, land is easily available, often through coercion or even violence, and so is cheap labor. These projects are justified in the name of tribal development, and the tribal people are forced to relocate from their ancestral lands. Thayer Scudder (an American anthropologist) said, "Besides murder, the worst thing you can do to a person is to displace them."

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